

NUI Policy on  
Extern Examiners for Research Degrees  
in the Recognised Colleges

November 2022



**Ollscoil na hÉireann**  
National University of Ireland



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# 1. Introduction

In accordance with the terms of the Universities Act (1997), the Senate appoints extern examiners and determines their functions.

NUI's Policy, Regulations and Procedures for the Approval of Research Degrees in the Recognised Colleges (2021) require recognised colleges to publish academic regulations for all research degrees offered, and to put in place clearly defined structures covering academic matters including, *inter alia*, appropriate examination arrangements for all research degrees.<sup>1</sup>

NUI policy reflects the practices in place in the constituent universities of the NUI federation, which align with national frameworks and guidelines for doctoral education.<sup>2</sup> At all times, NUI will seek to ensure the integrity of the examination process, and this requires the involvement of suitably qualified experts that are external to the recognised college.

## 2. Scope

This policy applies to NUI recognised colleges, including institutions that are designated awarding bodies (DABs) in their own right.<sup>3</sup> It covers the full range of research degree awards that are placed in the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) at levels 9 and 10, including professional research degree awards. Recognised colleges may offer some or all these research degree awards. Appendix 1 provides a current list of NUI research degree awards; this is a dynamic list reflecting the ongoing development of research provision in the member institutions of the NUI federation.

In Section 5 of this document, NUI sets out four key criteria for the appointment of extern examiners to research degrees at both master's and doctoral levels. The criteria are generally applicable to all types of research degrees. Where relevant, specific criteria are included for the nomination of extern examiners to professional research degree awards. This information does not replace the general criteria, but where there is any doubt, recognised colleges should follow the specific criteria on professional research awards.

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1 See Section 6.4 of NUI (2021) *Policy, Regulations and Procedures for the Approval of Research Degrees in the Recognised Colleges*. Available at [http://www.nui.ie/about/pdf/policy/NUI\\_Research\\_Degree\\_Policy.pdf](http://www.nui.ie/about/pdf/policy/NUI_Research_Degree_Policy.pdf).

2 See in particular QQI (2019) [Ireland's Framework of Good Practice for Research Degree Programmes](#).

3 The Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI) University of Medicine and Health Sciences, is a recognised college of the National University of Ireland while also being a designated awarding body (DAB), under the 2012 Quality and Qualifications (Education and Training) Act.

## 2.1 Professional or Practice-based Research Awards

Commonly referred to as professional doctorates, these qualifications follow the successful completion of programmes that incorporate taught and research components and supervised professional practice. The student typically undertakes a significant research thesis or project in their place of employment or professional practice, on a topic that is agreed with their employer and/or commonly aligned with organisational strategies or goals.

A professional or practice-based doctorate programme results in the award of a doctoral degree that is equivalent to a PhD award and is placed in the NFQ at level 10. Higher education institutions nationally, including NUI universities, are increasingly offering professional research degrees at the master's level, placed in the NFQ at level 9.

## 3. Function of Extern Examiners for Research Degrees

The function of the extern examiner for a research degree award is to review the research thesis or applied research project and provide an independent assessment on whether the work meets the criteria for the award of the relevant degree (at either NFQ Level 9 or 10, as appropriate). The extern is an important participant in the assessment panel during a viva voce examination and brings their national and international academic, professional and/or practice-based experience and expertise to bear on this exercise; making their recommendation to the examination board. The extern examiner also verifies that the assessment process for the candidate is conducted in line with the recognised college's published regulations.

## 4. Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

NUI is committed to upholding and implementing the principles of equality, diversity and inclusion in all its activities. Before nominating an extern examiner for appointment to a research degree award, NUI requires that recognised colleges consider the composition of the full panel and view the appointment of the extern examiner as an opportunity to bring diversity and inclusion to the fore in the overall examination process for research degrees.

## 5. Criteria and Guidelines for the Appointment of Extern Examiners for Research degrees

NUI sets out criteria in the following four domains:

- ▶ Qualifications, experience and standing
- ▶ Conflicts of interest
- ▶ Location (of the extern examiner's affiliated university or organisation)
- ▶ Term of appointment

### 5.1 Qualifications, Experience and Standing

- i. The extern examiner must have appropriate academic standing and expertise. The extern will be a recognised academic and/or professional or practice-based expert, at national and where possible, at international level, in the subject or field of study in which the thesis is being examined. This will be evidenced by information from their Curriculum Vitae (CV) as submitted to the relevant Head of School/Department/College, in line with local procedures in the recognised college.<sup>4</sup>
- ii. In its own policies and procedures governing research degrees, a recognised college may wish to supplement the information from the CV with additional requirements such as evidence of relevant academic or professional publications within a given timeframe.
- iii. At a minimum, an extern examiner will hold academic qualifications appropriate to the discipline, programme or subject to be examined and will hold an academic qualification at the same level as the award to be made via the examination in question or an equivalent. For example, for the award of a PhD the external examiner should hold a doctoral degree (or an equivalent qualification placed at level 10 in the Irish National Framework of Qualifications/Level 8 in the European Framework of Qualifications).<sup>5</sup>

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4 This includes special extern examiner approval forms with sections on relevant qualifications, experience and expertise.

5 Further information on the relationship between the Irish National Framework of Qualifications and other European qualifications frameworks available on the QQI [website](#).

- iv. An extern will have an appropriate level of experience to perform the functions of an extern for a research degree awarded by a university, as set out in Section 3 of this policy. In all cases, an extern will have verifiable knowledge of the academic standards required for a doctoral or research master's degree in the subject area of the thesis being examined.
- v. A recognised college may wish to add additional qualification requirements in its own policies and procedures governing research degrees. These should be noted by the NUI Senate.
- vi. For professional research degrees, the learning outcomes for the award will focus on both theory and practice in a subject or field of study. It therefore follows that an extern examiner for a professional doctorate will be academically qualified to PhD or professional doctorate level and will preferably have relevant professional experience at a senior level that demonstrates their credentials as an expert practitioner<sup>6</sup> in the profession.

These attributes will be evidenced by information from their Curriculum Vitae (CV) as submitted to the relevant Head of School/Department/College. An extern examiner will normally hold current or recent membership of a relevant professional body.<sup>7</sup>

- vii. In circumstances where it proves difficult to locate and appoint an extern with the required academic *and* professional or practice-based expertise, the recognised college will implement procedures to appoint a second extern examiner so that the examination board is fully competent. The recognised college will take care to notify the NUI Registrar at the time of making the nomination, and the Registrar will ask the University Senate to note the second appointment.

## 5.2 Conflicts of Interest

- i. An individual must not be appointed as extern examiner for a research degree if their impartiality could be called into question because of any foreseen conflict of interest arising from a personal or professional relationship with a member of staff (permanent or temporary) or a student in the recognised college. A perceived conflict must be made known upon nomination.

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6 NUI defines an expert practitioner as someone who has reached a senior level in a professional field, having engaged professionally in the field over a sustained period of time, typically no less than seven years.

7 Recent membership includes the preceding ten-year period.

- ii. An individual who was employed by the recognised college within a period of five years prior to the date of the scheduled *viva-voce* examination for the award of the research degree, may not be appointed as the extern examiner for that degree award. This includes full, part-time (permanent or temporary) and adjunct staff in academic, professional and technical grades and is particularly important in the case of individuals with teaching experience in the institution during the previous five years.<sup>8</sup>
- iii. In circumstances where an individual currently employed by the recognised college, in whatever capacity, presents for the award of a research degree in that institution, NUI requires the recognised college to appoint a second extern examiner. In the case of a doctoral degree, the second extern examiner would take the place of the internal examiner.
- iv. **For professional research degrees**, recognised colleges must take care to avoid the nomination of individuals as extern examiners who are themselves recent research degree graduates<sup>9</sup> of the institution.

### 5.3 Location of the Extern Examiner

- i. Recognised colleges should ensure that extern examiners based in countries with different traditions and approaches to the examination of doctoral degrees receive appropriate information and/or training on the regulations governing the award of the degree and the role that they are expected to play.
- ii. In general terms, NUI encourages recognised colleges to nominate extern examiners from institutions based outside the island of Ireland, to enhance institutional reputation by availing of specific expertise that is perhaps not yet well developed in Ireland and/or to increase academic links with international institutions. Notwithstanding this preference, the University accepts that in some circumstances the optimum nominee for the external examination of a research degree may be an individual who meets all the essential criteria and is based on the island of Ireland. In such cases, the recognised college must ensure that the criteria relating to conflicts of interest (Section 5.2) are strictly observed.

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8 The five-year period dates retrospectively from the date of the scheduled *viva-voce* examination.

9 Recent graduates are defined as those graduating from the relevant institution with a research degree award within the previous five years.



## 5.4 Term of Appointment

- i. An individual will normally act as examiner for one research thesis only over a consecutive three-year period in a recognised college. In exceptional circumstances, a recognised college may seek a derogation from this regulation for a specific research degree examination or research degree programme, in which case a rationale must be provided to the NUI Registrar for recommendation to the NUI Senate.

For professional research degrees, a recognised college may nominate an individual to act as extern examiner for up to three research degree awards in cognate fields of study/professional areas of practice within a three-year period. In exceptional circumstances, a recognised college may request approval to assign a fourth research thesis/project to an appointed extern. The decision to grant this derogation, in specific and exceptional circumstances, rests with the NUI Registrar and will be noted by the NUI Senate.

To note: the extern examiner appointed for the research thesis or professional/practice-based project will not simultaneously hold the position of extern examiner for any of the taught module components of the programme leading to the **professional research degree**.

- ii. An individual may not be re-appointed as extern examiner for a research degree award in a recognised college for a period of three years.

## Appendix 1: Types of Research Degrees awarded by NUI

The following table sets out the range of research degrees currently awarded in NUI's constituent universities and recognised colleges\*:

Type of programme	NFQ Level	Leading to NUI Research Degree	Short Title	Typical Duration (academic years)
Research master's programme	9	Master of Research	MRes MPhil MSc (Research) MCh (Master of Surgery)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ 1-2 years FT (3-6 trimesters)</li> <li>▶ 15 months to 3 years PT (5-9 trimesters)</li> </ul>
Doctoral programmes	10	Doctor of Philosophy	PhD	<p>Typically, <b>2 stages</b> over 3 to 4 years (9-12 trimesters) FT, or 5 to 6 years (15-18 trimesters), PT</p> <p><b>Stage 1:</b> 'PhD Track'</p> <p>An initial period of advanced education, training and research</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ 1-1.5 years (up to 5 trimesters) FT</li> <li>▶ 1.5-2.5 years (up to 7 trimesters) PT</li> </ul>

Type of programme	NFQ Level	Leading to NUI Research Degree	Short Title	Typical Duration (academic years)
		Doctor of Midwifery Doctor of Nursing	DM DN	<p><b>Stage 2:</b></p> <p>Main focus on original doctoral research but may also include further advanced education, research and generic training.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ 2.5-3 years (up to 12 trimesters) FT</li> <li>▶ 3.5-4.5 years (up to 18 trimesters)</li> <li>▶ Minimum of 3-4 years FT (9-12 trimesters)</li> <li>▶ Minimum of 5-6 years PT (15-18 trimesters)</li> </ul>
	10	Doctor of Philosophy by - Publication - Prior Publication - Published Work	PhD	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Minimum of 1 year FT (3 trimesters or 2 years PT (6 trimesters) depending on research experience through published scholarly material.</li> </ul>

Type of programme	NFQ Level	Leading to NUI Research Degree	Short Title	Typical Duration (academic years)
Professional doctoral programme	10	Doctorate in Governance	DGov	▶ Range from 3-4 years FT (9-12 trimesters) to 6 years PT (18 trimesters)
		Doctor of Educational Psychology	DEdPsych	▶ 4-6 years PT (12-18 trimesters)
		Doctor of Clinical Psychology	DPsych	▶ 3 years FT (9 trimesters)
		Doctor of Veterinary Medical Specialisation	DVMS	▶ 5 years PT (15 trimesters)
		Professional Doctorate (Nursing; Physiotherapy; Pharmacy; Positive Health) <sup>10</sup>	DProf (Nursing; Physiotherapy; Pharmacy; Positive Health)	▶ 3 years FT (9 trimesters)
Practice-based doctoral Programme	10	Doctor of Medicine	MD	▶ 3-4 years FT (9-12 trimesters)
				▶ 2 years FT (6 trimesters)
				▶ 4 years PT (12 trimesters)

<sup>10</sup> The programme leading to this qualification is expected to launch in January 2023.

## Appendix 2: References

ENQA (2015) *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area.*

NUI (2021) *Policy, Regulations and Procedures for the approval of Research degrees in the Recognised Colleges.*

QQI (2012) *Research Degree Programme Policy and Criteria.*

QQI (2015) *Participating on Evaluation Panels as a Peer Reviewer: Guidelines.*

QQI (2017) *Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines developed by QQI for Providers of Research Degree Programmes.*

QQI (2019) *Ireland's Framework of Good Practice for Research Degree Programmes.*

QQI (2021) *National Framework of Qualifications.*







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